ARTICLE

Montreal MKULTRA Experiments

Article by	Taylor C. Noakes

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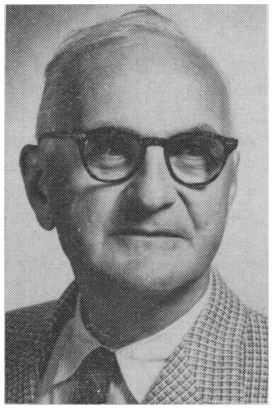
Between 1957 and 1964 (though possibly beginning as early as 1948), psychiatric experiments were conducted at the Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal — a psychiatric teaching hospital affiliated with McGill University. Scottish-American psychiatrist Dr. Donald Ewen Cameron led and conducted these experiments. The program is widely believed to have been partly funded by the United States Central Intelligence Agency as part of their top-secret MKULTRA program. The Canadian government also funded the project. The experiments' purpose was originally and officially listed as an effort to find a cure for schizophrenia. However, in reality, the project conducted illegal human experimentation to determine whether drugs and psychological techniques could be used for the purposes of mind control. Officially, neither the United States nor Canada has admitted to being responsible for the experiments. (*See* Canada and the United States.) Survivors have attempted to receive compensation with some success.



Donald Ewen Cameron
Cameron led the secret experiments at the Allan Memorial Institute as part of Project MKULTRA.

Indigenous History Quiz

believed that North Korea, China and the Soviet Union had employed mind-control techniques during the conflict, particularly on American prisoners of war. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan also conducted unethical human experimentation during the Second World War, some of which are believed to have involved the use of drugs for mind-control purposes. As a result, the US felt it was behind in this respect.

Donald Ewen Cameron

By 1943, Dr. Donald Ewen Cameron was already a well-known psychiatrist. He was invited to lead the new Allan Memorial Institute by famed Canadian neurologist Wilder Penfield. Dr. Donald Ewen Cameron would become the hospital's first director. Cameron would also become the first chairman of McGill University's psychiatry department. Well respected in his field, Cameron was considered a particularly humane and progressive psychiatrist. The Allan Memorial Institute was the very first mental hospital to operate on an "open door" policy. The institution allowed patients to leave should they choose to do so. As a day hospital, patients could also return home to their families after receiving treatments during the day. These innovations were considered groundbreaking at the time and have since become standard practice.

The Allan Memorial Institute
(courtesy of The Cosmonaut/Wikimedia)

Experiments

One of Dr. Donald Ewen Cameron's research focuses was the treatment of schizophrenia. He believed it could be cured by "depatterning" — erasing memories and bringing patients to a childlike state. Patients' personalities and identities would then be rebuilt using a technique called "psychic driving."

Psychic driving involved forcing patients to listen to taped messages played on a loop. Patients, who were immobilized and sedated, often underwent this treatment for as long as 16 hours each day. Messages might be repeated for hundreds of thousands. Typically, a patient might endure 10 days of negative messages — often attacking a perceived personality problem. This was then followed by 10 days of positive messages.

Psychic driving involved other highly experimental treatments like placing patients in a drug-induced coma. This practice was often done for much longer than they anticipated (one case is said to have lasted as long as 86 days). In some instances, the patient would also be given large doses of psychotropic drugs, such as LSD. In other cases, patients were subjected to electroshock therapy at up to 75 times the normal intensity. In other cases, both drugs and electroshock therapy were used simultaneously.

Some patients were also put into a sensory deprivation environment. This would have the effect of numbing basic senses like sight, smell and hearing. The method could even include

limiting patients' food and water consumption. Powerful sedatives were also used in high quantities to keep patients sedated. Patients were made as helpless as infants. They were unable to stand, walk or, in some cases, control their bowels. Cameron often went far beyond what was normally prescribed. For instance, Cameron subjected patients to more frequent electroshock sessions with more powerful shocks.

Many patients experienced retrograde amnesia. They became unable to recall memories made before their treatments. They also had to relearn whatever skills they had. In many cases, family members described their loved ones as being more emotionally unstable and damaged than before the treatments began. One patient describes being unable to remember what happened to her up to two years after her treatment. Another forgot his children or how to run the business he had managed for years. Hundreds of patients were likely treated by Dr. Cameron under the auspices of this program.

Connection to the Central Intelligence Agency

Dr. Donald Ewen Cameron's experiments and research caught the attention of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The agency provided funding through a front organization called the "Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology" from 1957 to 1964. Cameron is also believed to have received half a million dollars in funding from 1950 to around 1965 from the Canadian government. Former director of the CIA Richard Helms ordered files related to the Montreal Experiments to be destroyed when the MKULTRA program was concluded in 1973. In 1977, it was revealed that not all these files were destroyed. The CIA's connection to the Society for the Investigation of Human Ecology was subsequently confirmed.

Similar Experiments Elsewhere in Canada

Other experiments took place around the same time as the Montreal Experiments were being conducted. Women inmates at Kingston's Prison for Women were regularly dosed with LSD. They were also subjected to electroshock therapy as part of psychiatric treatments. Experiments were conducted on the inmates at the Oak Ridge section of what is now called the Waypoint Centre for Mental Health Care in Penetanguishene, Ontario. In addition, Indigenous youth in residential schools were also unwitting participants in medical tests of vaccines and vitamin supplements.

Violation of Medical Ethics

Researchers conducted the MKULTRA experiments without the patients' consent. This is considered a gross violation of medical ethics, even at the time. Key information — such as the nature of the treatments or the fact that they were experimental — was withheld from the patients' families. This left family members unsure of what had happened to their supposedly "cured" relatives. Medical records were further withheld, which made follow-up treatment impossible.

The violations of individual human rights went beyond medical ethics. The experiments contravened the Nuremberg Code. This was a code of ethics enacted after the Second World War as a consequence of the medical experiments undertaken by the Nazis.

Aftermath and Legacy

In 1975, the US Senate's Church Committee investigated abuses done by the CIA, National Security Administration and Federal Bureau of Investigation. As a result, MKULTRA became public knowledge.

Canadians first became aware of what had occurred at the Allan Memorial Institute in 1980. An episode of the CBC's *The Fifth Estate* revealed what had happened. Survivors of the experiments also spoke publicly about their experiences for the first time. In 1984, it was revealed that the US sent a formal apology to the Canadian government. However, the US also asked the Canadian government to not share any details about the MKULTRA program with former patients seeking an apology and financial compensation.

In the mid-1980s, the directors of the Allan Memorial Institute defended Cameron's actions. They stated that psychiatrists weren't expected to inform their patients of the experiments or treatment they were conducting in the 1950s and 1960s. They further claimed that there was no evidence Cameron was aware the CIA was funding his experiments.

Over 300 individuals made claims for compensation from the Canadian government. In 1988, nine survivors received compensation from the US government. In 1992, 77 survivors were

awarded compensation from the Canadian government. However, more than 250 claimants were denied compensation because individuals couldn't produce medical records, filed too late or weren't considered to have suffered enough. Then-justice minister Kim Campbell also refused to accept liability. In recent years, the families of those denied compensation have attempted to secure compensation from the government. In some cases, they were compensated only if they agreed to sign strict confidentiality and non-disclosure agreements. Advocates argue that the strict rules prevent people from speaking openly about what they experienced. The rules also discourage more victims from coming forward and further ensure the government won't take responsibility for their actions.

Neither the CIA nor the Canadian government has apologized for the human experimentation conducted at the Allan Memorial Institute that they funded.

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